

Staying Faithful when Faith is Under Fire

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[0 : 0 0] Today we're going to look at staying faithful when faith is under fire. We don't really often think about this, but when your faith is on the line, when your life is on the line, how are you going to react?

Sadly, in South Africa you might have been under that circumstance, if you've been held up and you don't know what's going to happen. Strange things happen at those points. But how can you be sure that when your life is on the line because of your faith, that you will stay faithful and true at that point?

How can we be sure that we will bear up under persecution? It's a good question to ask these days because of the way that the world is going. Persecution of Christians doesn't just happen in places like China or in Iraq for those missionaries that we pray for.

But persecution is beginning to happen in the West more and more as it abandons its Christian heritage. Here is a lady called Pivi Rysinen.

She's a minister in Finland. She's in trouble. She's being investigated by the state's prosecutor for hate speech.

[1 : 1 7] He says this, Announcing the charges in April last year, Finland's state prosecutor said Miss Rysinen had made comments likely to cause intolerance, contempt and hatred towards homosexuals.

And it came from a tweet where she questioned why the Finnish Lutheran Church was officially supporting Finland's Pride Week and attached a photograph containing verses from the Bible which appeared to describe homosexual acts as shameful.

So she's a minister in Finland and a minister in the government and she's being investigated by the government for hate speech for talking about the Bible.

Here in South Africa, we've got similar cases. I don't know if you've heard about the case of Beloftebos. It's a facility just outside Hermanus in Stanford.

It's a farm, but they hold weddings there. And recently, but it's run by Christians, and recently they got into trouble because they didn't want to host a gay wedding, a lesbian wedding at their venue.

[2 : 2 1] But it got to the press, but they're being prosecuted by the South African Human Rights Commission and they said this, the Constitution makes it clear that religious freedom must yield to constitutional prescript.

This is by the South African Human Rights Commission in the matter involving their wedding's refusal to host a lesbian couple. But notice this, religious freedom must yield to constitutional prescript.

In other words, our rights and freedoms as Christians must be under what our Constitution says. And so we're in this struggle here in South Africa at the moment and we know, you know, we'll be careful where it leads to.

Well, our passage today helps us sort of reconnoiter these sometimes tricky situations that we may well find ourselves in for following Jesus. Mark, here in this passage, throws up a sort of compare and contrast situation between Jesus and his disciples, really between Jesus and Peter.

And Peter sort of stands as a representative of all the disciples. And so we're going to take a look at each one in turn to see how they handle faith under fire and draw some lessons for ourselves today.

[3 : 33] So the first thing we're going to look at is the failure of the disciples. The failure of the disciples to stay faithful to Jesus when the heat is on, when the going gets tough.

The disciples' failure is due to a strange combination of overconfidence on the one hand and fear on the other. Earlier on in our passage, we saw their overconfidence in promising that they would never leave Jesus.

Remember back in verse 31, at the Last Supper, Jesus is talking about how God will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.

And then Peter goes on to say, even if all fall away, I will never fall away. And Jesus says, no, you will. And in verse 31, Peter says, he insisted emphatically, even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.

And all the others said the same. So they're making these claims that they will stay with Jesus. But really, it's just a bit of overconfidence on their part. Because when it comes down to staying with Jesus as he's arrested, the fear sets in and they're all bolted.

[4 : 47] Have a look at verse 50 in our passage today. Or just before we started reading from verse 53. Jesus is arrested. He's still in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Judas arrives, gives him that famous kiss of betrayal. There's a fight that breaks out. Jesus puts a stop to that. In verse 50, then everyone deserted him and fled.

A young man wearing nothing but a linen garment was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. They're just plain, old-fashioned, scared for their lives.

Peter, however, plucks up the courage to stick around. He actually follows Jesus, but not too close. He's going to warm himself by the fire down in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus is busy fighting for his life in front of the gathered Sanhedrin upstairs.

And all it takes for Peter to crack is one little question by a lowly slave girl. Hey, do you know this Jesus guy? No, no, no, no, no, no, listen, I don't know what you're talking about.

[5 : 57] Are you sure? Because it sounds like you're with him. No, no, no, no, I promise you. And then he starts cursing. Now, I remember Peter's a fisherman. So he's going back to his old days and a fisherman can throw out a few words when they need to.

And he swears and he's cursing. I don't, don't know this guy. Leave me alone. And so Peter, even though he's got a little bit of confidence to stick around with Jesus, it just takes one little slave girl to ask him a small little question and he just freaks out and he's gone.

So they've got this, they're overconfident, but they're also fearful at the same time. So where, where's this overconfidence and fear coming from? Why are they like this?

Funny enough, it comes from the same root. The problem that Peter and the disciples had is that they do not really trust in Jesus. They're not truly trusting in Christ.

Peter had, in a sense, too much trust in himself. He trusted too much in his own ability to know and shape the future according to his plans. He was overconfident in his ability to react to whatever may come his way and to do whatever it takes to get the outcome that he wanted.

[7 : 07] Remember the first time Jesus talked about his death back in Mark chapter 8? And Peter says, no, no, no, you can't go to your death. No, no, no, you're the Messiah. And Jesus responds, you don't know what you're talking about.

Sit down and keep quiet. I have to go through this. See, Peter has totally misunderstood how Jesus is going to receive his throne.

He misunderstands completely that Jesus will have victory, but that he's going to have it by being defeated and dying. And I guess you can't blame Peter for misunderstanding how that works.

Jesus is the Messiah. Everyone knows he's the Messiah. Well, I'm going to be this victorious Messiah. I'm going to be the Son of Man.

I'm going to be seated at God's right hand in power. But to do that, I'm going to be defeated and die. And so it's like a, it's a total, how does that work? I mean, just imagine you made a financial advisor who said he's going to make you rich by losing you all your money.

[8 : 11] He says, you know, listen, if you give me all your money, I'll make you rich, but you're going to get rich by me losing all your money. And you'd be like, you know, just how on earth does that work?

But Peter's misunderstood Jesus, who is the Messiah, but that has to go through this defeat and abandonment in order to be victorious. And this mistrust or this not trusting in this Jesus leads Peter to denial, bordering on betrayal, and it leaves him utterly devastated.

So the last verse in our passage where Peter breaks down and weeps. Well, I think here's a warning for us in being overconfident in our own abilities when faced with trials.

Oh no, we'll stand strong, we'll be okay, I've got a strong faith, I'll never, I'll never, dot, dot, dot, fill in the blanks. We should be careful about boasting about how strong our faith is.

One comment I saw on YouTube about this, Peter's denial summed it up quite well. She said this, one lady, how many of us would be like Peter under pressure?

[9 : 26] You know, we really don't know what we would do honestly unless we have been under the threat of life and death in our own lives. Peter was holding on to pride when he told Jesus that he would never leave him.

What would you do if someone threatened the life of your loved ones in an attempt to deny Christ? What if they threatened your children, your husband, your parents?

She says, mild to moderate persecution are practicing grounds to strengthen our courage and trust in Christ. And that's an interesting way of putting it. Mild to moderate persecution are practicing grounds to strengthen our courage and trust in Christ.

And so on the one hand you've got the failure of the disciples to trust in Jesus, they're overconfident in their own abilities and then they give in to fear. Contrasted with the failure of the disciples is the faithfulness of Jesus.

So we'll look at that now, the faithfulness of Jesus. So what keeps Jesus faithful during this trial? Well the first thing is that Jesus trusts in the sovereignty and power of God and this allows him to be realistic about evil but still able to overcome it.

[10 : 45] So Jesus trusts in the sovereignty and power of God. Now to see that in action, to see how Jesus is doing that, we've got to go back to the Garden of Gethsemane again. Just remember, just go back to verse 36.

Jesus is in the garden, he's really torn up and struggling knowing what's coming and he prays this prayer, verse 36, Abba, Father, he says, everything is possible for you.

Take this cup from me, yet not what I will but what you will. And what's interesting is that this is a replay of another man's struggle in another garden that took place millennia before Jesus did the same thing in Gethsemane.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Adam in the Garden of Eden. That man was also faced with a struggle between his will and God's will.

And that first man, Adam, failed the test but here, the new Adam, Jesus, remains true but not without struggle. He passes the test and remains faithful to God and to his calling as the new Adam, as this new ruler, the new king of the world.

[11 : 57] He doesn't fail and he aligns his will with the divine plan of God. But how can Jesus trust in the sovereignty of God when it seems like evil is about to win? Well, it's because he knows the scriptures.

He gets arrested, a fight breaks out and Jesus says, no, we're not going to, the kingdom isn't going to come by fighting. Let's have a look at verse 48.

Oh, from verse 47. One of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest cutting off his ear. Jesus puts a stop to it. Am I leading a rebellion that you've come out with swords and clubs to capture me?

Every day I was with you teaching in the temple courts and you did not arrest me. And then here's the key, but the scriptures must be fulfilled. The scriptures must be fulfilled.

He knows that these things must happen. That it's been pre-planned by God and that this is the way for God's great rescue plan for the world to come true.

[13 : 04] This is how God is going to change a creation marred by sin and death and be rescued and redeemed and renewed. Remember, three times in Mark, Jesus has spoken about his death and betrayal and every time he does that, three times, he says, but the Son of Man will rise again from the dead.

So he knows it's going to happen, but he also knows what's waiting for him. So the first thing that gets Jesus through this trial and staying faithful is this deep, rock-bottom trust in the sovereign plan of God that will establish his kingdom no matter what Jesus is going through.

and he feels it in the Garden of Gethsemane. We've got to give it the full power that it allows. He really felt it and yet he still stayed faithful to God because he knows that's how God works.

And then the second thing that keeps Jesus faithful is Jesus stays true to his identity and to his destiny, really, as the Messiah, the anointed Son of God. And that's the real key to our passage today.

So have a look at where the high priest is interrogating Jesus from verse 61. Again, the high priest asked him, Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?

[14 : 23] I am, said Jesus, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus is standing before the full convened body of the Jewish leaders. They're all there. Mark makes that point. They've all gathered to condemn Jesus and find him guilty and put him to death.

They're trying to catch him out. He remains, initially remains silent on the trumped-up charges about the temple. They can't even agree with that. But the high priest gets frustrated.

And that question, Are you the Christ, could almost be a mocking question? Are you the Christ? Can this really be true? You're standing here all by yourself. Where are your followers?

Where are your armies? Where's your power? You know, Jesus certainly doesn't look like much to them standing there. His followers are all gone. He's alone and seemingly powerless with no one to help him.

[15 : 25] They've got him in the clutches of their power. You know what it's like when you go into a big committee meeting and there's everyone sitting there looking at you. You know, it's intimidating when three or four people are standing there looking at you.

Imagine a whole parliament of people and you're standing all by yourself and they're all out to get you. But Jesus' answer acts like a thunderclap and tells them in the most direct way possible that he is not alone, that he is not powerless, but rather that he is the covenant God of Israel on his side and indeed he, Jesus, is the one with true power and authority.

You know, Jesus combines some of the most explosive texts in the Old Testament to talk about who he is. He combines that text we read in Daniel 7 and another one, Psalm 110.

And it's interesting that both these texts have been used by Jesus in key moments in Mark. He uses Psalm 110 in Mark chapter 12 to ask about his identity and then he uses Daniel 7 in Mark 13 to talk about what he's going to do once he's been resurrected and here in Mark at the sort of crux point in his witness of who he is he combines both of them into this incredibly powerful statement.

If you remember, why don't we just turn to Daniel quickly, Daniel chapter 7 I want to highlight to something there for us to think about. Daniel 7 Daniel 7 is a strange chapter.

[17 : 04] It's got these visions of beasts. These beasts that crush and hurt and maim and kill. There's four of them. The worst one is the fourth beast.

They're powerful and strong and rampaging through the world and hurting people. Those beasts, Daniel tells us but the commentators tell us as well, are kingdoms of the world.

They seem unstoppable. They seem so powerful. Nothing can stop them. But there's two things that can stop them. One is the Ancient of Days. We sung about that. You read about him in Daniel 7.

Have a look at verse 9. This is Daniel seeing this vision of God. As I looked, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his place. That's not a doddering old fool.

That means someone who's got the power of eternity in his hand. He took his seat. That's a throne we're talking about. But read about what this throne looks like. His clothing was as white as snow.

[18 : 01] The hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him.

Ten thousand times, ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened. I don't know about you but imagine that's your name written in that book.

You would pause. I mean if they called out your name at that point. Dylan. Yes. But there's this being with this huge power and he's surrounded by thousands and tens of thousands of people with more power than we can imagine.

And then into the middle of that amazing scene comes one man. this son of man. Jesus. Who's standing in front of a crowd of people who's going to kill him and he's saying that's me.

Daniel is still having a vision. Verse 13. In my vision I looked at night at night I looked and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.

[19 : 16] He approached the ancient of days and was led into his presence. He was given authority glory and sovereign power so that all peoples and nations and men of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never end. This is a guy with serious power. Second only to the God of the universe who's sitting there on the throne next to him.

That's what Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 are all about. What do they do to these kingdoms that are rampaging all over the world? Verse 26.

The court will sit and the power of the fourth beast his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. And not only that then the sovereignty power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to who?

the saints. Now we're going to make a point about that a little bit later. It's given to both Jesus and his people. These kingdoms that are on earth. The whole heaven will be handed the sovereignty power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints the holy ones the people of the most high but it ends with the son of man whose kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all rulers will worship and obey him.

[20 : 43] Jump back with me to Mark 14. Can you see the kind of power that Jesus is talking about that he's got here?

Can you see why the Jews sitting in front of him the Jewish leaders are like well you know we don't see it. And in fact you know how they respond next? And they take their fists and they start beating him to a bloody pulp.

Blasphemy! We don't want this! We don't see it! And the reason for that is that Jesus has almost directly threatened them.

I don't know if you noticed it but notice in his answer in verse 62 sorry about those sitting in the front seat there. Who are you?

Are you the Christ? Can you be the Christ? Yes! I am. And what's more you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right coming on the clouds and sitting on the power of heaven.

[21 : 51] That's a threat. And in Daniel 7 that means that the fourth kingdom those beasts are going to get taken out. Now those kingdoms are pagan kingdoms but Jesus is here threatening the people in front of him.

He's saying guys you're the beast because you're opposing me. They accuse him of blasphemy but the irony is that they're the ones that are blasphemous because they don't see that Jesus is this man the Son of Man that God is positioned in this power.

The Jewish leaders are going to do their best to stop him from being the Messiah. They're going to kill him but they're not going to be able to keep him dead. Because Jesus is the Messiah God will raise him up invite him to take his seat next to him in heaven and begin his rule over earth.

Well that should help us in following Jesus better especially when we have when our faith is under fire.

So here's two lessons for us to hang on to when we are faced with testing in our lives. Here's how we can take our stand and be sure to follow Jesus when our faith is under fire.

[23 : 01] First of all just like Jesus we've got to have total trust in the total sovereignty of God. When faced with injustice and evil Jesus trusted in the total sovereignty of God whose plan to get rid of evil doesn't mean that you won't go through it yourself or face it but he promises that evil won't have the last word.

we've got to trust the way that God works. God doesn't fix brokenness by taking it away. Sometimes he does but often he doesn't.

He fixes brokenness by using brokenness to heal. He uses pain to bring about healing. He uses failure to bring about victory.

He uses weakness to exhibit strength. Here in Jesus he's going to use the innocent to forgive the guilty. He curses one God curses one man so he can bring blessing to all.

God uses death to bring life. And here's where the crux is where it gets difficult for us because he will use those things in our lives to both test our trust in him but if we do that then he will use our pain and our sacrifice to bring about his plan of saving the world.

[24 : 21] We get to be part of that plan if we go through the same kind of trial and testing and we stay faithful to him. But it requires a lot of faith to trust in God but we've got to see him as totally sovereign who's sovereign over evil.

Does that make sense? So we trust in the total sovereignty of God and then we need to know who Jesus really is. We've got to have this same understanding of Jesus that Jesus had of himself.

We've got to have Daniel 7. We've got to have Psalm 110 as the picture of who Jesus is. Those two texts in the Old Testament are the most quoted texts in the New Testament when applied to who Jesus is.

Especially Psalm 110. But how many times have we looked at Daniel 7 in the last couple of months and years at St. Mark's? I mean it is one of those key things that tell us about who Jesus is.

We must hang our hope on the true identity of Jesus. And that will give us a vision of his true destiny as well as ours.

[25 : 23] So that point in Daniel 7 where Jesus gets the kingdoms of the world as his inheritance and then he gives it to us. I don't know about you, I don't know what will happen when your parents pass away and they leave you an inheritance.

A couple of kingdoms would be nice. Jesus is the mighty and exalted Lord of heaven and earth.

The one who has defeated death and been raised to life. Who sits at the right hand of God, whose throne is a river of blazing fire and who will come back to judge the living and the dead. We need to have this big picture image of Jesus in our minds if we're to overcome times of testing in our life.

Peter failed at this point as he's following Jesus but he didn't stay a failure. Writing years later, Peter knows all about what following this Jesus looks like.

This is Peter writing in his letter, 1 Peter chapter 1 and he says this, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in his great mercy.

[26 : 38] he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

Though, now, for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

And that praise, glory and honor goes to God but it comes to us reflected through Jesus because we stay faithful and have had our faith refined through these trials, knowing what inheritance is lying ahead of us.

Is that, you follow that sequence? In closing then, psychologists talk about the fight or flight response. You know when you are fighting for your life, you come across a life-threatening situation and your fight or flight response kicks in, your adrenaline jumps, boom!

We're going to fight, you know the disciples tried that, take the sword, chop the air, Jesus like, no, no, we're not doing that. Then they fled, that's not going to work either.

[28 : 05] Well, you know, Christians have another response available to them. It's not just fight or flight if you're a Christian. We've got a response available to us that's not conditioned by human psychology, but by the risen Christ.

We have a faithfulness response available to us. So when faced with a life-threatening situation, there's fight and there's flight, but if you're a Christian, you've got a third option, staying faithful.

Under trial and under pressure, we can turn to and trust in our Lord who was dead but is now alive. And that should help us to stay faithful under fire.

Let's pray to Jesus. Dear Lord Jesus, we humbly come before you, knowing that in our own strength and power and ability, we will nine times out of ten, ten times out of ten, mess things up.

We'll either overreact and fight or underreact and flee, but Lord, we want to stay faithful and true. We can't do this in our own strength, Lord Jesus.

[29 : 21] Please be merciful. Give us your Holy Spirit so that no matter what comes our way in this life, we will stay true and faithful to you, the Son of Man, seated at God's right hand, ruling in heaven and on earth.

Help us to do these things for your glory and honour. Amen. Amen.